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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, parent involvement in schools has centered around management or organizational concerns; parents are "helping hands" to deal with activities and problems of running the school, providing extra services the school cannot afford. This paper describes ways to involve parents directly in students' academic achievement, asserting that it is the direct responsibility of the principal and staff to keep energies and efforts focused on academic concerns at all times. The paper distinguishes between parent involvement, which refers to parents taking part in activities or efforts at school, and parent support, which is any means by which parent actions or attitudes reinforce the academic program of the school at home. The establishment of a parental involvement and support committee at Apollo Middle School (Nashville, Tennessee) is described, including the creation of a school plan for parent support. Suggestions are given on presenting the plan to parents and ensuring follow-through, including the provision of community activities within the school building to "lure" parents into the school. (EV)

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PARENT SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT AT APOLLO MIDDLE SCHOOL.

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PARENT SUPPORT AND INVOLVEMENT
AT APOLLO MIDDLE SCHOOL

Traditionally, parent involvement in schools has centered around management or organizational concerns. In This context, parents represent "helping hands" to deal with activities or problems of running a school, e.g., supervision, maintenance coordination and service. In most cases parent involvement in schools provides "extras" or special services the local school cannot afford. Parents are invited to school to perform many and varied tasks: make popcorn, sell baked goods, provide treats, run room parties, and supervise extracurricular activities. Parent are also asked to attend P.T.A. meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and the annual open house. Frequently, parents are asked to volunteer their services at school to help with pupil supervision during lunch, recess, bus duty and dismissal.

Also, parents are asked to work in the library, media center, or school office so additional services can be provided for students, teachers, and parents. In other instances, parents are asked to serve on advisory committees as required by state and federal programs. In essence, traditional parent involvement is focused on help from parents with matters not directly related to the main business of the school student achievement (Cutrona, 1994).

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While the intent of parent involvement has been to keep parents informed about what the school is doing and to insure support the result has amounted to a public relations effort by the school to make parents feel good about the school and to project an image of an effective, well-run organization. Although these are not improper purposes, the extent to which the time and energy spent by the staff promoting and conducting parent involvement activities carries over and impacts on improving student achievement is questionable. As we have stated earlier, the first order of business of the school is teaching high achievement for all students. Effort of teachers and parents must serve this purpose first and other purposes second. It is the direst responsibility of the principal and the staff to keep the energies ands efforts focused on academic concerns at all times.

Since it is our belief that attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of the staff do, in a large part, make the difference between a high and low achieving school, the decisions the staff makes about what people should do to promote student achievement are very important. This is true not only of what the staff does at school, but also what the school should expect from parents at home. In too many instances, the school does not clearly explain to parents how they can assist in raising their child's achievement or firmly communicate that parents are expected to support their child's academic efforts and the school program.

The school staff must decide what it wants parents to do to enhance their child's learning in the classroom or the home. This message must then be communicated with conviction to parents.

The issue of how parents can best assist in raising achievement must be discussed by the principal and teachers and should result in a concise school plan for parent support. In particular, the distinction between parent involvement and parent support should be understood (Fisher, 1994).

As used in these modules, the term "parent involvement" refers to the ways parents show support by participation at school or in school sponsored activities. Parent involvement in this sense means coming to school or helping with a school project or concern outside regular family life or home activities. Parent involvement activities include things like attending parent teacher conferences, acting as a volunteer tutor assisting the teacher in the classroom. In general, involvement is direct contact between the parent and the school (Fructher, 1993).

The term "parent support," on the other hand, refers to any means by which parent actions or attitudes reinforce the academic program of the school at home (Duncan, 1992).

For example, parents can show support for the school at home by following through on request or instructions from teachers or the principal, such as contacting the school when a child is absent. Parent can also support the school by modeling and reinforcing academic behaviors valued at school. Parent support may be shown by all parents, including those who work schedules or family responsibilities make it difficult or impossible to come to school. While parent support in some instances may not be conspicuous, it is a mainstay of the school and is essential for its smooth operation and ultimate success (Duncan, 1992).

The importance of distinquishing between support and involvement activities require parents to come to school. Support activities can be done at home. Our purpose is not to place value judgments as to whether parent involvement activities are better than those of parent support. Although parents can be active at school in a variety of ways, the principal and teachers should encourage involvement in ways directly related to instruction. Parent involvement efforts should facilitate-learning process, first and foremost. It must be understood, however, that involving parents in this manner requires teacher planning and direction to be successful. Parents should not be expected to be teachers.

Therefore, teachers must identify suitable and realistic ways for parents in what to do and supervise their efforts. Without proper training a parent can become a liability to the teacher instead of an asset, adding to the teacher's worries and responsibilities with little educational return.

According to Fruchter (1993) in particular, parents should be asked to perform important task such as:

1. Assisting the handling of instructional materials. (duplicating, filing, locating sources, and correcting. Assisting a teacher of the school to develop and maintain an up-to-date instructional resource file is a time consuming task and can be of invaluable assistance.

2. Supervising students working independently. As noted in the module on academic engaged time, students time-on-task usually suffers greatly during independent seatwork due to lack of adult supervision.

3. Tutoring. Assisting students to correct skill deficiencies through tutoring can be effective if conducted properly.

> In particular, recent studies have shown that well-planned, structured tutoring has questionable value. This approach could be carried out largely by volunteer parents if the required training and supervision is provided.

Obviously, opportunities for parent involvement are many and varied. The school staff must decide what it wants parents to do and then provide several options for parent response. Parent support for schools usually suffers from staff neglect. In particular, the failure to assign responsibility for developing a school-wide approach to a specific person or committeeresults in no one being responsible and consequently, little or nothing gets done. Too often, it is not clear whether anyone is in charge or what expectations and responsibilities they have (Nardine, 1991). For example, teachers may feel that developing parent support is the principal's job. The principal, however, may feel this is the responsiblity of the teachers or a parent organization such as the P.T.A. The parents on the other hand expect the school staff to take the lead so they sit back and wait to hear from the school. The question of who's in charge of parental involvement and support was eliminated at Apollo MIddle School by the principal.

The principal selected a parental involvement and support committee which consisted of eight (8) teachers. The parental involvement and support committee's responsibility is to select specific goals and objectives to increase parental involvement. Then they had to outline ways that parents could implement the goals and objectives. According to Loveday (1988), unless the previously mentioned plan is carried out the net result is minimal parent participation at best, probably of a superficial nature to maintain the appearance of a home/school relationship. If the school is to shape its own destiny, the school must provide leadership in organizing parental support of academic goals. The acceptance of specific responsibility for heading up parent support groups should not exempt the rest of the staff from involvement it must be clearly understood that getting parent suppport is everypne's responsibility and everyone is expected to do their part to make it successful. In most schools, the principal is the designated person to provide the leadership, impetus and coordination requires for mobilizing teachers and parents (Fisher, 1994). In any event, the issue of parent support for improving achievement should be thoroughly discussed by both staff and parents; priorities and needs must be identified, a program of action planned, and specific duties assigned.

Obviously, for greatest results, this should be done early in the school year so plans can be formulated, communicated and implemented in time to make an impact on student achievement.

After careful review of Fruchter (1993) research on parental support, The Apollo Middle School Parental Involvement and Support Group reinforced its views that the school staff should communicate clearly and simply to parents its needs for support and involvement that can facilitate high student achievement as stated earlier. The staff should initiate this communication by designing a school plan for parent support that coordinates the efforts of school and home to improve achievement. The plan should establish a norm for parent behavior that will facilitate and promote student success in school. This norm expressed in parent beliefs, expectations and action is, in effect a home learning climate.

It is not intended that the school should dictate to parents how they should live or behave at home in order to be good parents. Rather the school should express to parents what they can do to increase their child's chances of being an academic success. As the agency responsible for formal education, the school shool should be able to communicate to students and parents what it takes to be an achieving student.

In order to do this the school must explain exactly what it does; what the curriculum is all about; what the homework, attendance, and discipline policies are first and foremost. Having done this the school plan for parent support should represent specific ways that parents can create a home learning climate that is consistent with and supportive of the school program (Fructher, 1993).

As noted by Loveday (1988), the school plan should encompass both parent support and involvement. With emphasis should be placed on parent support since all parents can be expected to give support but not all parents should be involved at school. It should be simple and easily understood, identifying clearly what parents can do at home or at school to support student achievement.

Also, it is important that the school plan be brief and concise. This will facilitat understanding of what is being said, help teachers and parents to remember the scope of the message. According to Nardine (1991), in drafting the plan, the following guidelines should be considered:

1. Clearly state what you want and expect parents to do. (spell it out-use action words)

2. Be realistic in terms of demands upon parent time. (keep it simple)
3. Identify a variety of ways parents can help either at home or school. (offer choices)
4. Conceive that plan so that everyone can do something. (expect every parent to help)

Although the school plan must be aceptable to parents, the staff should assume responsiblity for drafting the plan. It is important that ownership of the support plan be shared by the whole staff. Ownership of the support plan comes from involvement in a process of staff interaction. The interaction of the entire faculty and staff in the plan is critical and must not be circumvented. The process of drafting a parental support plan should provide opportunity discussion, brainstorming, expression of feelings and attitudes, presentation of information, identification of needs and expectations and resolution of conflict. This process may take several meetings, so provisions should be made for adequate discussion time. Failure of a staff to invest sufficient time in exploration, planning and communication will lessen the probability for genuine acceptance or ownership by the staff.

An organizational time/task chart should be developed so the plan can proceed in an orderly and definitive manner. Once the plan is acceptable to the staff it should be presented to a representative parent committee for review and preliminary reactions but not approval. If serious concerns are identified in the parent review process, the staff should consider the advisability of reversing the schools parental support plan (Cutrona, 1994).

However, it must ultimately represent the needs of students and consistent with a positive school learning climate. Hopefully, there will not be any serious differences between the parental support plan and what parents can contribute. If so, an effort to educate parents on the efficacy of improving the home learning climate will be needed. A distinction is made between the school plan for discipline and the parent suppot plan. In the parent plan, the staff specifies what parents should do to support the school and students achievement. The school plan for discipline, however, informs parents of what the school will do to maintain order.

The mere distribution of a parental support plan to parents will not result in significant changes in parent or student behavior. The plan only represents an attempt at clarity of purpose and coordination between home and school.

For maximum succes, provisions must be made by the school to promote parent understanding and follow through. Cutrona (1994) suggested that the following distribution of the plan to all parents, meetings should be held and in neighborhoods to explain:

1. The school program for improving achievement.
2. The plan for parent support and involvement to reinforce the school's program.
3. The parent actions requested by the school.

Requesting the help of parent groups, such as the PTA/PTSO, Title-I or special advisory committee, homeroom parents, block clubs, to set up meetings will be of great assistance. The principal and teachers should be present to answer questions and demonstrate their sincerity and desire to work cooperatively with parents. Failure to conduct discussion meetings with parents in addition to merely sending the paln home will have little impact.

The school staff must take the intiative and leadership for making parent support a reality. The list of reasons why parents aren't involved in the school program is endless but the potential to turn it around is as great today as it has ever been. All parents, low or high income, black, whit, brown or red, deprived or advantaged, share a strong common desire: the success of their children (Nardine, 1994).

The desire for student success is the same as the goal of the school and the purpose for which it was created. However, parent support and involvement do not come easily. The challenge for the school is to take the initiative and tap parent concern for student success, providing many options for effective involvement and suppport of student achievement.

The research conducted by the various authors served as a foundation for implementing a successful parental involvement and support program. After reviewing the research, the Apollo Middle School Parental Involvement and Support Committee experienced a dramatic increase in parental involvement during the 1995-1996 school year. Almost thirty-five (35) percent more or about seventy (70) additional parents joined the Parent Teacher Organization than in the 1994-95 year.

In addition, there was about a twenty (20) percent increase in parent volunteers. An additional seven (7) parents worked in various school programs as assistant teachers in reading, math tutors, monitored students' absentee's, office assistant, library assistants and in some instances aided in computer instruction.

While the research served as a basis for a good working foundation it failed to give ways of the initialy getting the parent in the school house. Many parents avoid the school house for different reasons. However, the committee decided to provide community activities to lure the parents into the school. The school is a large part of the school. Finally, activities such as adult education, square dancing, and voting are activities which initially get the community into the school. Therefore, the school should house more community based activities for once parents see the school as a vital part of the community only then can we see more parental involvement and support.